


ANIMULA VAGULA



LEONARD BACON



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024

ANIMULA VAGULA

By

LEONARD BACON

Author of "Ulug Beg" and
"Ph.D.'s"

"Animula Vagula," the title of which is taken from Hadrian's famous address to his fleeting soul, is not quite a story and yet it is much more than a collection of unrelated lyrics. It may best be described as a series of moving poems in which a sensitive poetic mind has recorded the various moods which accompanied a deep emotional experience—that of a descent into darkness and a return to light. The readers of Leonard Bacon's acidulous "Ph.D.'s" and his vivid "Ulug Beg" will be surprised and delighted at this new aspect of his genius.

Animula Vagula

Animula Vagula

By

Leonard Bacon

Author of "Ph.D.s"



Harper & Brothers Publishers

New York and London

Mcmxxvi

"Animula Vagula" by Leonard Bacon
Copyright, 1926, by Harper & Brothers
Printed in the United States of America
First Edition

G-A

Introduction

*THIS is the legend of a fearful thing
That doubtless will not touch the passer-by
More than a journal murder strikes the eye
Of a loiterer on a pleasant street in Spring.
Yet I was in that horror when a wing
Batlike brushed out of darkness. And on high
Were fire and vapor of the nether sky
That Dante's self had not the art to sing.*

*Yet am I breathless, on the brink emerging,
How I scarce know, nor surely could reveal,
I who in Hell heard the last trumpet peal,
And saw destruction of the soul and worse,
And a new Heaven and a new Hell emerging
From the chaos of a ruined Universe.*

Animula Vagula

I

THIS is the road to Hades. We go down,
Valor that wore the crown,
Honor that bore
Such good repute before
Droops like an idiot his bewildered head.
And innocence is dead.
Nor do these things revive
Where that stern wind is blowing.
And that last sunset, glowing
Vestige of light that is no more alive,
Turns ashy like a coal.
“We have arrived, my soul.”

What I loved and hated
Where are they now?
The zest unsatiated?
The pleasure that I waited?
The beauty that somehow
Has been abated?
They are gone.
Why should I struggle on?

In the chasm spews the asp.
And the salamander swims

Through a dead pool nuzzling limbs
That were sweet to a man's grasp.
There is neither form nor shape
In that execrable deep.
There is neither sleep
Nor escape.
And dream not of the sun,
Of a girl, or of a rose,
What was done, or what undone,
Or finished, or begun.
The terrible deep knows
What vengeance it will take.
Therefore wake.

Keep the constant thought.
Trust the true feeling.
They are in the deep
Where the asp and adder sleep,
With the hurt and with the healing—
In the dreadful darkness caught,
With the horror overfraught,
Whence there is no appealing.
When the lights are paling,
And the hopes failing,
Comes the truth revealing.

II

THIS is Himalaya that by day or night,
Lifeless, enormous, faces down the sky.
Too thin her air. That glacial crest too high,
Whatever beauty may abide in height.
I have vain years roamed round that summit
white.
And though I scaled it, what were gained
thereby?
Barrenest vanity of victory,
And blank achievement in my own despite.

Whence comes this numbness on the overween-
ing
Madness that was engenderer of the scheme
With pride? They are defeated like a dream.
They heaved the height. They made the cold
peak fair.
They gave false beauty and imperfect meaning.
Give up. Go down, my soul. There is life
there.

III

HEREDIA saw a tropic reef where gleamed
A tarpon's fin, and heights of coral
gloomed.

But I am going deeper, where entombed
Pulses a black terrific life undreamed,
In depths irrevocable and unredeemed,
Only by the light of their decay illumed,
Or where slow fishes phosphorescent-plumed
Flicker 'mid horrors that the deep has teemed.

Down through the hopeless darkness drops the
dredge
Slung from its cable, mechanical, precise,
And snatches from the silence in a trice
Its secrets, octopod, polyp manifold,
Exploded things, limp hanging o'er the edge,
The larvae of the dark abyssal cold.

IV

THIRTY-EIGHT years. Yes, neither less
nor more,
Of which an anxious third have been spent
earning
The pittance of what *faute de mieux*'s called
learning.
And two insane, but actual years of war,
And five books written—two out of my heart's
core
Full of the fury of my central burning,
Whose heat escapes the reader undiscerning,
Who cannot see what they were written for.

And then for me the cosmos circumspect
Whirling an orrery of lighted gyres,
Steady, superlatively ordered fires,
In one chaotic turmoil crashed together,
Disorbited, annihilated, wrecked.
Can I reshape it? Well I wonder whether.

V

THE siege is over. And the walls are down
In the dismantled city of the soul.
Here fire and there the sword have taken toll.
And the inhabitants have fled the town.
Courage ran first and with him good renown.
As for the famous captain self-control
He's in the mountains hiding in a hole.
And not one passion trembles at his frown.

Despair's a silly word. It seems to me
Something by implication almost gay
Beside the thing that I perceive today,
The liquid of the Phlegethontian stream,
The parching water in whose glass I see
My own face like an idiot's in a dream.

VI

IT IS not pleasant feeling one's between
A Yahoo say and an Orang-Utang;
To be a coward much too weak to hang;
To be at once ungainly and obscene;
To feel that one makes foul things that
 were clean;
To have a brain that's only a meringue
Of tasteless sweetness, lacking any tang
Of valor, passion, wrath, or even spleen.

I have been driven into this of course
And it may be, I can be driven out.
Your powers are very wonderful no doubt.
But anyone will grant they are immense,
If you can spur a blind and spavined horse
Over the water-jump and six-barred fence.

VII

NOT to be shot? No, only to be stripped
Before his comrades of his gold and lace;
To have his sabre broke before his face
By hands that once his own in friendship
gripped;
To hear the colonel read aloud, stern-lipped,
Stiffer even than his wont, and without trace
Of feeling, the whole edict of disgrace
To the silent regiment—Then to be whipped

At the triangles, while the appalling drums
Drown out the screech, and pat with every
crash
Bloodier and bloodier falls the nine-fold lash—
No wonder I've a nightmare in the soul
That tears me and benumbs and overcomes.
I am well cast, but do not like the rôle.

VIII

THERE are some delicate places left that
might

Twitch for a little with a faint contraction,
Although I fancy it's mere reflex action.
For when the thumbscrew is adjusted right,
And every tendon on the rack drawn tight
And the strappado set to the last fraction,
Then the tormented has this satisfaction
That the red-hot pinchers will not have much
bite.

Pain's its own anodyne. Just take enough,
It kills in time the nerve that it convulses
As fever stills the beat of wildest pulses.
There is no wine that quicklier fires the brain,
No cordial potent as that perilous stuff.
I ought to know, being dead drunk on pain.

IX

I SAW that shattered thing,
And did not understand
Why to the hovering wing
It raised a tragic hand.

By the accurséd deep
Where the obscure stream flows,
I stood on the black steep,
Uncaring for the woes
That my own spirit knows.

On the abhorrent brink
Where Death is born anew,
And the thinker cannot think,
And the doer cannot do,
There was I too,

Careless and debonnaire
As a child at play,
Nor felt in the black air,
Swirling around me there,
What I must slay—

Achilles with flaming hair
And the unarméd heel,
Balder the fair,
Unpierceable with steel.
They are fallen, slain by craft,
Discrowned of all their light,
By the envenomed shaft,
And the oak's parasite.

Roland's in ill report,
And Charlemagne grows old.
Galahad makes poor sport
For a common whore I'm told.
Lancelot cheats at cards.
Merlin, who rhymes no more,
Has stolen another bard's
Sweet legendary lore.

Gone the enchanted horses,
And the women with wings.
We are on our own resources
With unheroic things.
And that stings.

Uncoils the Midgard Snake;
Atlas lets fall the sky.
What from that night shall wake
When the stars die?
What shall rise from the dark
And the mortal and stricken star?
Life with a perishing spark?
And people that are?

X

I HAVE seen Paradise and Hell together,
And Beauty caught in an appalling maze
With ugliness, and living that decays
Into corruption, and have wondered whether
The scale reptilian and the eagle feather
Were different, or the transitory phase
Of things eternal that in changing ways
Become the same in spite of wind and
weather.

And this is neither schwärmerei, nor beer,
Nor misconstrued psychology gone bad.
But it is something that my soul has had,
Evidence of the spirit, a sure token,
The music of an unperturbed sphere,
Which has revealed that which was never
spoken.

XI

DANTE was naïf although he had an inkling
Of what I know. Forgive me if I seem
To boast like one in an ecstatic dream.

I have read a parchment when the leaf was
crinkling

In Hell-fire—seen a sacred planet twinkling
The better for the darkness, like the gleam
Of the mystic rose, and heard in my own scream
Cool discrete music, like a Bach fugue tinkling.

I have found at the bottom of all things the
height,

The unknown future in the unknown past,
The first of things commingled with the last,
Stability in water, motion in rocks,
Sight in my blindness, blindness in my sight,
And truth perpetual in a paradox.

XII

WE SIT thick crowded in the Gothic nave.
Moans the deep organ, wails the violin
Cool as a swordblade laid on fevered skin.
Music like resurrection from the grave
Rises and falls. And vault and architrave
Quiver as though a pulse were beating in
Their atoms. And unheard-of planets spin
In depths of sound thrilled by an infinite wave.

A sinner calls on Jesus in his need—
A strong, immaculate, dulcet sound that shakes
The spirit more than flames or thunderquakes.
Yet, with the trembling of the first sweet bars,
Why did I see white Dian on her steed,
Launching her silver arrows at the stars?

XIII

HERE I lie coiled
In the swampy grass where
the pink orchids are.
Go slow, you with the eyes that
seek a star.
Watch where you tread.
I am Death and am not dead.
I am hidden and when I like
May strike.
And when at the time and place
Up from the shadow I dart,
You will suddenly start
And terror will bleach your face
And numbness sicken your heart.
And my black eye shall brighten
in the sun
As the venom begins to stun.
Turn from the star to the weed
Where the orchids hang.
Mine is a fearful fang.
Take heed.

XIV

IF YOU know many pleasures,
You must know many plagues.
As they say, you'll get no omelette
If you do not break the eggs.
I put 'em in one basket,
And by the same token,
When I fell—when I fell—
They were nearly all broken.

My ostrich-egg was splendid
With a beautiful shell.
But it flew into forty
Thousand pieces when I fell.
And the neighbors around me
All thought it a joke
When they saw that my egg
Had an addled double-yolk.

My cassowary specimen
Is cracked past repair.
And my little birds of Paradise
Will never take the air.
The thrushes most musical,

The tanagers of flame,
Are lost in a welter
Too horrible to name.

Oh, I have an omelette
That is cooking on the fire.
And whoso desires it
May eat to his desire.
But the egg of a humming-bird
Came safe through the fall.
I wonder—I wonder
Will it hatch after all.

XV

ONCE there was music, now jangling instruments.

Once there was a bright god. Now there is a satyr

In a blasted wilderness, eating his heart out,
Too well remembering

The clean-limbed and beautiful, bathing in the trout-stream,

Where the fall clashes, the young, the white-handed,

Sweet and soft-bosomed, exquisite and gentle—
Bitterest of memories.

The satyr is ever jovial in poetry.

The wine makes him merry, and the limbs of the naiades

Kindle a coal in his bursting black eyeballs,
But in reality

The satyr sits mournful, in London for instance,
Where his hoofs and his haunches are not all unusual,

Thinking of a girl who should have had Apollo,
And only got Marsyas.

XVI

IN MALEBOLGE better men than I
Have found their sorrow, and looking in
her eyes,
Have seen beyond all question of surmise
The desolation of the earth and sky.
And some endeavored, some obtained to die,
Though there was that in some that never dies.
And some emerged, Hell having made them
wise,
And as they had fallen low, so they went high.

I know not what it means for me. The best
Or worst have gone no deeper than I went
On that apocalyptical descent.
But I am weary, and my courage faints.
Wings are about me in the dark unguessed—
Pinions of devils, or the plumes of Saints?

XVII

LONDON'S beginning
To feel like Home.
There's a devil grinning
On Paul's dome.

I have decided
That her beggars and whores
Are all provided
By Harrod's stores.

Her great endeavor
Is always to be
What she was ever
Till she sinks in the sea.

So give the man a shilling,
And give Dayrolles a chair,
For the nightingales are thrilling
Ere the lark's in the air.

And a thing of beauty
Is a joy despite defects.
Every man will do his duty
England dubiously expects.

My name is Ozymandias,
King of Kings, they say;
But I don't like brandy as
Well as Dolly Grey.

Make me immortal,
Sweet Helen, with a kiss.
Open the portal
To your forty-shilling bliss.

Oh music straying
Through heights of air,
Wild as a saying
Of De La Mare.

Pure burst of fire
Beyond comparison!
O J. C. Squire!
O Austin Harrison!

XVIII

IDIOTS will prate and prate of suicide.
I shall not take my life. It has been taken.
They strangled me, and now I lie forsaken
In the cellar of the brothel where I died.
I walk and talk of course. It's not implied
That this live corpse of mine is never shaken
By startling reflex action. But what can
 waken
The slaughtered hope, the immolated pride?

This may appear fantastic. The fantastic
Is a luxury I cannot now afford.
You, sir, may scatter from your golden horde
Orient conceits. They cost you but a breath.
But my sad soul was caught in orgiastic
Embraces—and the harlot's name was Death.

XIX

HERE is my sword. Here are the city-keys.
I yield. It was no spirited defence
For which the conqueror pays a recompense
Of praise to the conquered beaten to his knees.
I bear no scars save those of the disease
Of cowardice, dishonor, and pretence.
And whoso trusted in my faith and sense
Must find henceforth better supports than these.

I might of course make things seem quite too
bad
By hinting at some hope, but lack the art
Further to dissemble, or to play a part
Even to myself, who am easily deceived.
The liar and the coward and the cad
Must say their say, and they must be believed.

XX

THE satyr is wandering down the rocky
stream-bed

Where once ran the waters, where the river
nymphs sported,

Drying their hair in the shade of the sycamore,
Laughing together.

Dry is the stream. The bright waters have
departed.

Yet in his brain there is bubbling an agony.

And his forehead is wrinkled, and his loins are
heated,

As he imagines

How he captured Lycoris alone by the trout-
pool,

Sleeping in the heat, and how her eyes opened

Fearful, unwilling, and the shudder of her
bosom

Caught in embraces

Not to be desired and not to be evaded,

And her frightened yielding to what had o'er-
taken her,

Her timid half-response to the fierce penetration,
The passion, the pulsing.

Desire burns like fire in the waterless stream-
bed,
On the hot rocks where the adder lies sunning
Its bright mottled armour, in its cold veins
feeling
The fearful and ancient

Rhythm sempiternal of the same bestiality.
It puffs out its gorge. And the satyr's eyes
bulging
Consider the vanished and tragical picture,
Gleaming like fox-fire.

And his ears sharpened like little hairy lances
Suddenly prick toward the West like a stal-
lion's,
As he hears on the wind the chorus of maidens
Chanting to Dian.

XXI

WHY was his hoof shaped, and his knee-
joint bent backward?

The hairy, lascivious, terrible Goat-God,
That made himself out of the bodiless ether,
And into Arcadia

Descended to dwell in the shadow of the oak-
wood,

Or wherever the silence breathes in the thicket,
Making a mystery, making a horror,
Till the cicala

Screams in the hot noon, feeling a presence
Too dreadful to bear, that impregnates the sun-
shine

With sense of the dark and the cold interstellar,
Void and unlighted.

Vainly Apollo shoots through the oakleaves
His arrows of gold, and vainly white Dian
Climbs the blue height in her shallop of silver.
He stands behind them,

Cruel, ironic, as he stood but a moment
Agone in the shade of the ilex-tree, listening
To the wail and broken sob of a naiad
Panting, deflowered.

XXII

IT WAS red country—not like that I know,
And I was not like me. The brick-red
boulders

That filled the waterless stream-bed all were
dry.

I leaned upon a big one, looking down,
Suffused with bright intensity of heat,
Watching God knows for what. All was un-
known

Myself the watcher, and whate'er I watched,
Brooding o'er the rosy warmth. Doubtless in
season

A cataract would go roaring o'er those stones
Where not an ant stirred. Only I looked and
looked,

Feeling a goatish pulsing as I gazed,
A secret flame more smoky than that fire
I am wont to cherish, if perchance it burn
A moment in the mansion of the brain.
Then sudden as a shot in the clear space
Amphitheatrical, where the dead stream curved
Aside, with feverish haste two figures sprang,
Passed in a flash, and were gone—the messengers

My saturnine self awaited. With a shock
I was I again, glaring at the infinite
And terrible things I cannot understand.
How should I know those visionary twain?
They had their secret. It was not disclosed.
Even the I that was not I conceived
But ill their meaning and the intention of them.
Yet something cried within me with a shriek
Triumphant: "At last! At last, the messen-
gers!"

XXIII

THERE are deeps like Bermuda's in one's self
Hard by those shallows hardly filmed with
spray,

Where are cast up dead sea-things that decay,
And the sun turns jelly-fish to faery pelf,
And spoondrift to the treasure of an elf.

But past the reef where the gulls scream and
bray

Goes down the deep. There far beneath the
day

Undine's strange eyes watch from her coral-
shelf—

The soul-less soul of man, wild counterpart
Of the rejoicing spirit in the sun,
That laughs aloud where the white horses run.
She stares at darkness, and she does not sleep.
High o'er the waves crash in the brain and
heart,

That send a tremor through the ancient deep.

XXIV

I HAVE an enemy, and I praise God
I hate him to his pudgy finger-tips.
I loathe his cranks and I abhor his quips
And wanton wiles worthy a lecherous cod,
His wreathed smile, his belly's bursting pod,
His mouth, that venom-sac whence poison drips.
He *is* the beast of the Apocalypse,
That no sane fiend would condescend to prod.

What would I do without him? He renewed
Valor within my miserable soul,
Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control,
And other old, unhappy, far-off things.
And I, because a rooting swine was lewd,
Found myself launched on unaccustomed wings.

XXV

AS I came down into Sussex
In the sweet August days,
The apples were hanging in Edenbridge,
The mountain-ash was ablaze.

Then—then I beheld her,
All beauty in a flash,
On the brown cheek of the apple,
In the flame of the mountain-ash.

Or lying in the bracken,
Where the “Clumps” stand round and high,
And prodigal the heather
Spilleth her Tyrian dye,

Drifted strangeness around me,
Delicate and sweet,
Winds of remembered loveliness
Breathing in the heat.

Ah, so easy to see her!
Ah, so hard to attain!
Thought in my own city
Shall capture her again.

XXVI

I HAVE subdued my hand
To the Phoenician stain.
That glow comes not again.
The tapestry I planned
Hath an ignoble hue.
I must dye it anew.

There is murex in the deep
Where the merchant has not dived,
Where the polyp many-lived
Feeleth the ebb and sweep
Of the Oceanic throb.
There I must rob

The coral of my dyes,
Plunging where never man
Had hardihood to scan
With widely opened eyes
The strange rich colored life
With my phantasy rife.

For there shall gleam on my loom
The fishes of the Vast,

Deeps where no beam down-cast
Smites drop-like through that gloom.
Out of the nether night
Comes up my light—

Bronze, violet, orient green,
The play within the pearl,
Mad purple from the whorl
Of the shells of the unseen,
Scarlet of visions, hues
I may justly use.

XXVII

THERE is dogwood in my soul.
The white four-petalled bract,
Pure, virginal, intact,
Gleams in the heart of the whole.
It has taken from the dark
That whiteness manifold.
Warmth trembles through the cold.
From lightlessness a spark
Kindles, and with the kindling
There is song in my ears
Formed by perpetual spheres,
That know no dwindling.
Where the golden-rod and aster
And the sumach flamed,
I saw the Spring unnamed,
And at last am master
Of the pale lordly place,
To which my stricken eyes
Never dared rise
To look on that still face.
Beauty that is content,
The stellar fire
That the soul may not hire,

Nor the wit invent,
Have habitation with me,
Who passing by way of the Grave
Crossed over the sacred wave
Of the Spiritual Sea.





The May Co.

